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A Labor of Love

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As head carpenter for *The Beatles LOVE*, Ben Stephenson '00 creates astonishing new audience experiences that keep the Las Vegas favorite flying high.

Stephenson takes the wheel of one of the show's featured props, a Gold Filigree Volkswagen Beetle, also known as the Smoking Car due to an inside switch that turns on the fog, which rises from the hood.

By SCOTT MOREAU '01

As I traversed through the winding walkways of the Mirage Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas to meet an old friend of mine, a vivid memory hit me. It was from the fall of 1997, my first year as a music theatre major at Illinois Wesleyan. I was working strike for the first show of that year, *Into the Woods*. I have a very clear recollection of two things: my friend Jim throwing up beside the loading dock because of the gallons and gallons of spoiled milk-based paint he was asked to empty, and Ben Stephenson moving around the shop like he was a professional. He was a sophomore.

Nearly 20 years later (and looking not a day older), Ben is the “guy behind the guy,” making things happen behind the scenes for *The Beatles LOVE*, Cirque du Soleil’s magnificent marriage of music and movement performed at a specially built 2,000-seat theatre in the round since 2006.

It’s a long way from the painted backdrops and Styrofoam props that Ben used to bring Illinois Wesleyan theatre productions to life. However, creativity, resourcefulness and focus continue to be defining qualities of his work. Moreover, being part of a live production remains as thrilling and unpredictable as ever.

As head carpenter of *LOVE*, Ben was involved through every step of a two-year process of re-imagining this Las Vegas strip favorite, which now features new acts, costumes, choreography, technology and music designed to give audiences a more vivid and engaging experience.

Those changes were revealed at the Mirage in 2016 at a 10th anniversary celebration of *LOVE* attended by the surviving Beatles, Sir Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr, as well as Yoko Ono, Olivia Harrison and Giles Martin, the show’s current musical director and son of the Beatles’ longtime producer George Martin.



A revamped version of Love was launched for its 10th anniversary, boasting technical enhancements that weren't possible when the show was first created.

Late one evening before the anniversary performance, Ben walked me through the vast passageways that comprise the backstage of *The Beatles LOVE* at the Mirage. Along the way, he pointed out countless illustrations of the show's evolution, reincarnation and rebirth.

Ben recalled how the show's director, Dominic Champagne, spoke at length about *LOVE* being "a living, breathing piece." With the vast amount of Beatles music, video and photography available, there was no reason for the show to stay stagnant and "live in a museum." From its sepia-toned beginnings, the show has become more vibrant and colorful, drawing on imagery from the Fab Four's psychedelic period, such as *Yellow Submarine* and *Magical Mystery Tour*.

New, vibrantly colored costumes (including a new "Blue Meanie" character) and set pieces (a new sun for "Here Comes The Sun" featuring more rays of LED light) are just the tip of The Beatles *LOVE* iceberg. Through a rethinking and reconceptualization of the "Revolution" portion of the show, the iconic red London telephone box center stage has been replaced by a full-sized Volkswagen van. Custom-made by a company in Portland, Ore., the van features a unique top made by none other than my buddy Ben and his team.

"I'm pretty sure this is the only 1967 acrobatic VW van in existence," Ben informed me.



A new addition to the show is a full-sized, 1967 Volkswagen van that provided a major challenge for Stephenson — including design of a durable acrobatic mat to match the iconic vehicle's roofline and contour while providing safety for the artists as they perform their high-flying dance.

"One of the biggest design challenges I faced was in the designing and building of this large acrobatic mat here on the roof," he explained. "It had to match the roofline and contour of a VW van because it's such an iconic vehicle. It was a challenge to build that into an acrobatic mat that would hold its shape night after night, but also to be the proper density and tension for the artists doing their tricks. Safety and functionality were my main concern, while at the same time it had to fit onstage and appear to be an exact replica."

The amazing high-speed skaters who leap, twist, flip and jump massive, 11-foot-tall ramps to the music of "Help" have also benefited from a recent upgrade. According to Ben, the ramps have been resurfaced with the highest-quality material money can buy — the same material that covers every competition skate ramp in the world. It allows the performers to do more, higher, more difficult tricks, and to give *LOVE* audiences yet another reason to *oohh* and *ahhh*.

Ben led the charge for another innovation: All 6,400 square-feet of stage floor was transformed into a fully functional projection surface, adding depth, color and a three-dimensional effect to nearly every scene. In general, tech for the revamped *LOVE* is staggering. Some 600 custom props and 52 projectors are used, and it takes 27 servers and four control computers, with 30 terabytes of storage, to run the show.

In his rare moments of downtime, Ben takes a break from all this technology by hand-making woodprints and furniture with a familiar theme: the Beatles.

Beatles in the mix

The chance around every corner to meet members of the greatest rock band ever, creative challenges at work every day, and hearing some of the greatest songs ever written, in amazing-quality surround sound — I tell Ben it all seems like a pretty great gig to me. He agrees that all of the above gives satisfaction. But it doesn't end there.

To be involved in *LOVE* is not only to be a part of Cirque's history but also to become a part of the Beatles' legacy, explains Ben, who has been with the show for the entirety of its 10 years. "The reason I have stayed here this long is that I think we are adding to the Beatles' legacy as a band. I think their music is extremely important the world over, and with the work we are doing here we are really doing something good."

Part of what makes working on *LOVE* so compelling, he adds, is that the Beatles have been so involved in its conception and evolution. The show is a joint venture between Cirque and the Beatles' own Apple Corps Ltd., and

it's not unusual for the group's surviving members and their families to stop by to catch a show or check out the new additions. It's their involvement that gives *LOVE* its authenticity.

"The first song we ever heard in this room 10 years ago was 'Strawberry Fields.' It was George and Giles [Martin] who played it for us. We heard it through this amazing sound system with nothing else going on. And then ... we heard them talk about "Strawberry Fields." They told us exactly how it was recorded. 'This drum beat is from this song, and this dog barking is from this song.' Which was insane. To have that sort of input is inspiring."

And there are just certain things you can only know if you're a Beatle. Ben gives an example: "One thing that has always been a feature of our show is a multi-sensory experience. During 'Here Comes the Sun,' you actually have an olfactory sensory experience that fills the room, along with our audio and visual experience. That was originally done with incense that comes out on some moving trains of light that were remote controlled and driven out on stage. Now it's a spray that goes into the fans that the spotlight operators spray."

And the reason for that change? "The Beatles said to us, 'That's not the right smell. That's not what it smelled like when we met with the Maharishi. This is what it smelled like,'" Ben explains.

"To have that first-person experience from them and to have that sort of input into the show is why I think we have been successful all of these years. Because you're not getting a tribute show here," he says. "You are getting part of their legacy, their life. They are telling their story through us. And in that way, I feel a lot of pride to be a part of it."



The scent-infused, meditative "Here Comes The Sun."

Among materials provided for the revamped *LOVE* are stunning black and white shots of Paul McCartney that the former Beatle helped unearth in the Apple archives and are now used to great effect in the new and jaw-dropping trapeze act set to "Yesterday" (one of the most played songs in radio history). These new pictures of a young Paul, doe-eyed and fresh faced, are among many things the show's creators hope will appeal to audiences young and old.

Making the Beatles' music come alive now and in the future is really the mission of *LOVE*, Ben says. It's a mission I can relate to: Just down the Vegas strip at Harrah's Casino I was part of the cast of *Million Dollar Quartet*, re-creating the music and persona of Johnny Cash on a night in 1956 when he and fellow Sun Records stars Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins ended up in the same room for perhaps the greatest impromptu rock 'n' roll jam session ever. Like the songs and stories of those musical legends, the Beatles and their impact on our culture lives on.

"It's affecting people, and it's affecting different generations, and I'm proud of that," Ben says. "My grandmother knows who the Beatles are, and my son who is 6 knows who they are. And I think the marrying of those two worlds is amazing. Having Paul, Ringo, Yoko Ono, Olivia Harrison and George and Giles Martin here, we've heard the stories from them. We've been given the knowledge to know what we are doing and why it's important.

"I walked out of the show one night, and there were three women of three different generations in the same family. One of them was holding a picture of what I would assume was the patriarch of the family and had passed on. They were taking a picture in front of the *LOVE* sign out front — I was just blown away. We affected that family tonight. And to know that feels really good." Thanks to Ben Stephenson and many others who have devoted their considerable talents to making *LOVE* an authentic Beatles experience, those good feelings are not going to fade any time soon.

This story is an expansion of a piece by Scott Moreau that he originally penned as guest writer for Robin Leach's column, which is published by the Las Vegas Review-Journal.



Scott Moreau

About the author: Scott Moreau '01 lives in New York City, auditioning, and looking forward to his next project playing Johnny Cash in *Million Dollar Quartet (MDQ)* at the Tony Award-winning Papermill Theatre in New Jersey. Recently, Moreau served as director and played Cash in *MDQ* at Farmers Alley Theatre in Kalamazoo, Mich. — the biggest-selling show in the theatre's history. Previously, he completed all four years of the first national Broadway tour of *MDQ*, reprising his role at the Ogunquit Playhouse in Maine, which also garnered record-breaking ticket sales.

Since graduating as a music theatre major at IWU, Moreau has performed a variety of roles, appearing everywhere from his home state of Maine to Osaka, Japan. He made his professional directorial debut with *Ring of Fire* at the Round Barn Theatre in 2011, and in 2013 he released *Home of the Blues: A Tribute to Johnny Cash* at Sun Studio, available on iTunes and on CD. He also played Young Jim Neary on the final episode of HBO's Emmy award-winning *Boardwalk Empire*. Earlier this fall he concluded an eight-month run of *MDQ* at Harrah's Casino on the Las Vegas strip.

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